

Nitya Vidyasagar

# Indian American on Sesame Street

By GIRIRAJ AGARWAL

**T**all, yellow Big Bird, roommates Bert and Ernie, monsters Telly and Zoe, Cookie Monster, Elmo and other Muppets of *Sesame Street*, the popular American television show for children, will have a new neighbor soon—a young Indian American who runs a self service laundry, called a laundromat. This new character, Leela, being played by Indian American actress Nitya Vidyasagar, will make her debut in August on America's Public Broadcasting Service television network.

"It feels wonderful to be part of the show. It is such a cultural icon for young children in America. I have always loved kids and I really believe in the transformative social and educational power of the arts in general and this show is an amazing example of it," says Vidyasagar, who lived in Kolkata, Hyderabad and Bangalore as a kid. Her parents emigrated to the United States when she was 12.

The new character, Leela, is a product of two cultures, just like Vidyasagar, and the name is also



*Above: Nitya Vidyasagar, who will make her debut on Sesame Street this August, with Muppet Abby.*

*Below: Vidyasagar with Muppets Snuffy (left) and Big Bird.*

not an arbitrary choice; it was the name of Vidyasagar's grandmother. Sesame Workshop, the producers of the show, describe Leela as young, vibrant, connected to her Indian heritage, and also a modern American woman with varied interests. She enjoys singing, dancing and generally helping out when called upon by her new friends on Sesame Street.

How does she do the cultural balancing act? "I think finding the cultural balance in Leela is entirely informed by trying to find it in my own life. Leela's cultural identity is definitely a product of my own journey to bridge the gap between two cultures," says Vidyasagar, who lives in New York City. "As Leela develops, she seems to me to be an affectionate and fun-loving dreamer. Her friends and family are important to her. She is quirky and kind, definitely a people person and she shares my passion for the arts."

How did she win the role? "They

were holding auditions for a new, young character and I went for it. They were not specific about ethnicity but there were probably characteristics they had an eye out for in terms of the energy they wanted to add to the show," she says.

Multiculturalism has been an integral part of *Sesame Street* and the inclusion of Leela is further proof of that. "I hope Leela serves as a role model and kids learn along with her as she learns from her neighbors. While she may not be furry or feathered, she adds to the diversity on the street," the actress says. She feels it's an absolute joy to work with the famous Muppet characters of the show. "They have been incredibly gracious and welcoming. I think the way we work and support each other is probably very similar to the way any group of actors work together."

India has already seen its own Hindi version of *Sesame Street* in *Galli Galli Sim Sim*, launched in 2006 with funds from the United States Agency for International Development. "I have not seen it yet but I can't wait to," says Vidyasagar. "I would love to stop by the next time I am in the country!"



#### For more information:

Sesame Street

<http://www.sesameworkshop.org/>

Galli Galli Sim Sim

<http://www.galligallisimsim.com/aboutus/default.html>



Photographs courtesy Sesame Workshop